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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

No. 126 March 25th, 1942

DEAR MEMBER,

The decision of His Majesty's Government to seek an immediate solution of the Indian problem and the mission entrusted to the Lord Privy Seal have put India into the centre of the war picture. This dramatic action brought a momentary awakening to the fact that the war might hinge on the satisfaction of Indian feeling, but it needs to be far more widely and deeply realised how fundamental for the future is the problem of the relations between different races. It meets us in the war both as danger and as opportunity.

The entry of Japan into the war brings new sinister possibilities of the feelings of hate engendered by war being augmented by irrational colour prejudice. The Japanese are busy fomenting racial animosity against the white peoples. Reports from the United States suggest that among the masses in America the dominant emotion is desire for revenge for what has happened in the Pacific and that there is a rising tide of colour feeling. Such feelings are fed by the reports of the shocking inhumanity of the Japanese in the treatment of prisoners in Hongkong. (We must not forget that there are also reports of good treatment of British subjects in Japan, which are apt to receive less publicity.)

The danger of these irrational tides of feeling is that they lead to facile and false generalisations, which prevent us from seeing our problems truly and thereby make us incapable of dealing with them. Because the atrocities have been committed by Japanese, and condoned by their Government, we attribute them mistakenly to the Japanese race as such. Far more realistic and profound is the Christian view which sees in such vile acts the manifestation of human sin—sin which is universal and in which we all in greater or less degree share. This is not to say that there is no difference between our standards and those of the Japanese ; there is happily some reality in the Christian and humanitarian tradition of the West, even though it is flouted in the continent of its origin. But as between the yellow and the white races, the Japanese have done, and can do, little to surpass the record of the Germans. And as regards ourselves, if we read again the words which our greatest poet puts into the mouth of his hero, King Henry the Fifth, in the address to the men of Harfleur, describing the vengeance to be exacted by English hands, we shall realise how recent and precarious are the restraints imposed by humane feeling on the passions let loose by war. The moment our judgments are no longer qualified by the remembrance " But for the grace of God— ", we are on dangerous ground. The deeds are not to be excused or palliated. But we can never rid the world of these depravities unless we keep both our heads and our humanity. Colour feeling must not be allowed to sway or warp our judgment.

That is the negative side. The positive factor is that in this fight against the Axis Powers and their inhuman doctrine and practice the western democracies are associated with the great Asiatic peoples of China and India and the Negro race in Africa and in the United States. In this common defence of essential human values history offers us an extraordinary opportunity of laying new foundations of inter-racial understanding and

good-will. But as Miss Margery Perham remarked in the two notable articles which she contributed to *The Times* of March 13th and 14th, it will require a scarcely dreamed of " exercise in racial understanding with these Asiatic powers, including Russia, *built up almost from nothing in the next few years.*"

It is in the setting of these vast issues that the mission of the Lord Privy Seal to India must be viewed. It is only in moments of grave crisis that Britain seems to become aware of its historic destiny. Faced with a problem so baffling as to appear almost insoluble, the British Government re-affirmed in action their faith in the guiding principle of the growth of the British Commonwealth, which, however great its shortcomings, remains a monument to belief in principles of justice and liberty and of individual freedom under the reign of law. They " have unitedly agreed on conclusions for present and future action," designed " to aid India in the realisation of full self-government " and to convince all classes, races and creeds of their " clear resolve." Recognising that the proposals can succeed only if they obtain Indian assent, they have, before making them public, sent a member of the War Cabinet, who can ill be spared from urgent tasks at home, to satisfy himself by consultation on the spot that the proposals will achieve their purpose. They have at the same time contributed to India the ripe wisdom of British political experience by framing their proposals so as to " avoid the alternative danger either of resistance of a powerful minority, which might impose an indefinite veto on the wishes of the majority, or that a majority decision might be taken which would be resisted to the point destructive of national harmony."

People have been quick to realise the evidence of bold leadership and wise statesmanship. These have gone some way to restore the prestige of this country, which has sunk through our strategic failures to a low ebb, and have had a tonic effect on public opinion. This determined effort at the eleventh hour to infuse a new spirit into our relations with India is the kind of action that might be a real turning-point in history. But it can be this, only if it is the expression of a fixed resolve to cast away all misguided ideas of racial prestige and to establish our relations with other races on a human basis of equality and mutual respect. We have to renew our faith in the finest strain of our own tradition, shaped, as it has been, by Christian values, and make up our minds to find in the war occasion for giving it fresh practical embodiments.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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THE CHRISTIAN NEWS-LETTER

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THE GOSPEL DRAMA AND SOCIETY

DEAR OLDHAM,

You have lately used the phrase " the Christian imagination." You suggest that, if Christian people are to join in the work of planning and reconstructing civilization, and hope by so doing to bring us nearer to a secular order in which the Christian life can be better lived, they will never succeed merely by advocating the best social principles or projects, nor by making these more intellectually acceptable. Fruitful action and the release of new social energies will only be obtained from a new source of power, and that power, you suggest, may be approached through the imagination.

WHAT IS IMAGINATION?

This I believe is profoundly true. The creative and formative power which religion has to oppose to the ways of the world, to discipline society at large and to refine or re-mould its institutions, is a power that works through the imagination of men, though it does not end nor begin there. But what is imagination? Some people are not clear about this. Sir Francis Galton, when he made his once famous " Enquiry into Human Faculty," was surprised to find that several distinguished men were offended at the idea that there could be a real faculty of imagining, and still more so at being thought ever to use such a thing. Yet everyone in fact lives largely by imagination, as he can soon prove if he takes the trouble.

If one withdraws for a little while from mixing in with the business of life, and tries to observe what is happening in the mind, one soon notices that there are two kinds of things going on in it. First, there are words—there is a sort of conversation proceeding in one's thoughts : one is talking to oneself. Of this we are all more or less aware, and, as Pascal said, it behoves a man to take some care as to the tenour of those inner conversations. But besides this converse in words, there is a succession of images passing through the mind or lingering in it, images composed of memories of things the senses have experienced. Objects may be seen, more or less clear in form and bright in colour ; odours are recalled almost as strongly as if they were present, sounds are heard with the inner ear. These etherialised sensations, which we call " images," are the substance of imagination, and most of us do a good deal of what we call " thinking," not in words, but by either manipulating combinations of these images (as to some extent we can) or by passively following and attending to them as they succeed one another. In the former case, we may be in some degree training the imagination : in the latter the imagination is more or less in control of us.

It is not as simple as that, of course: sometimes a word or a phrase can live and glow with all the sensuous reality of an image : poets, for instance, are always seeking these moments when word and image are as one. And on the other hand, images may sometimes come to mind like wraiths of themselves, without life in them, as merely abstract and symbolic as words in a dictionary. But in the main, words and images are clearly distinct in kind and function, and unless we are controlling or expressing the flow of images by a flow of words or by some other discipline it is the imagination that is directing our ways. We do not live them: we are lived by imagination.

If what has been said so far is true, we see what a power there is in imagination. Evidently it can control a person, whether he knows it or not, in every moment of inattention. Imagination is, after its own fashion, doing our thinking or willing for us, in each moment that we cease consciously to think or to will. And we know how often that is, don't we ? So we should expect to find, and we do find, that not only Christianity but every great religion has taken particular care to form and train the imaginations, even more than the minds, of its members.

THE SACRED STORY

This training of the imagination by religion, as it concerns the individual, is one thing : another is the discipline it applies to the community, and this is largely the cultivation of a common imaginative activity. Public worship and ceremonial are among the chief methods of this discipline ; and these are always centred in the reading, reciting or contemplation of the *mythos*—the sacred biography, history or drama which is the heart and origin of the faith. That is why the art of the drama is specially related to religion : the imagination is more powerfully affected and shaped by dramatic events than by anything else. Just as our private imaginations (so the psychologists tell us) never quite cease to act over again certain " dramatic " experiences of our individual childhoods, so the imagination of a religious community is forever rehearsing again the sublime play between celestial and earthly beings from which it traces its origin, and in terms of this drama it understands its present world.

This is so with every great religion, and with Christianity most of all, because the sacred *mythos* is in this case also real history: a part of our whole inheritance of knowledge. It is an actual experience of the human race and has a peculiarly factual relation to our present civilisation. With a quite special vividness and sharpness of definition we are able to experience the drama embodied in the New Testament and the whole epic of the Bible of which it is the consummation : these are given to us with a realism that is denied to those who worship according to other faiths. Because the Gospel drama really happened, and is a racial experience, it can affect the minds that receive it at deeper as well as higher levels of consciousness than the intellectual, it may influence levels at which we dream. No other biography, history, social drama (for it is all these) has exerted through the imagination of men, so strong a shaping force upon their world.

ITS RELATION TO SOCIETY

This power over human imagination, and through imagination upon human affairs, is one with the truth of the Gospel drama. It revealed the nature of life because it was the most brilliantly representative, typical piece of life that anyone can imagine. For that reason also, it throws light upon every human problem, including the problem which has been discussed so often in the News-Letter—the problem of reshaping our present civilisation. Now that our world is falling to pieces around us, we are even more tortured with anxiety for the future than regrets for the past : we all want to discern the right shape for things to come, so that we can work and live on with renewed hope and confidence. We look eagerly to all those who are providing ingenious and wise plans for the future, wishing to give our support to the right efforts and movements, and often we feel more bewildered than enlightened. I am sure we all have moments of complete despair, when we doubt if anybody really knows what is best to do, or if it is humanly possible to know what men want, what they would ever stick to, or what human society either is or ought to be : and it is just at such moments—this is what I want to say—that we would do well to remember that the cardinal truths about human society have all been powerfully revealed to us, in a form which we can apprehend through the imagination.

We ought therefore to meditate upon the Christian drama, expecting that it will enlighten us about human society, about the break-up and change of societies through wars and revolutions, and above all about the reconstruction (or rather the re-creation, for there is no such thing as the " reconstruction ") of society. Perhaps we have forgotten that the greatest teaching about man in nature, society and civilisation is to be found in the Bible, especially in its accounts of the whole drama of the Incarnation, the divine ministry, the Crucifixion and the apostolate that followed. In this mighty tragedy, which is also a piece of the history of our own civilisation, are to be found living pictures, as it were, of all those social forces which are active in any typical social, political and economic crisis. The Bible is not only the best book given under heaven about individual salvation. It is also the greatest book —to put it academically—about sociology.

The questions about which the News-Letter has been exercising our thoughts—questions of behaviour in war, of education, of care of the young, of the relations between estates, civil, military and ecclesiastical—these are all presented " in the round " as it were, they are bodied forth in dramatic form, we see them in action before the face of God ; and that is, in truth, the only ultimately right *answer* that can be given to those questions.

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PRINCIPALITIES AND POWERS

When we meditate upon this drama, trying to grasp it as a presentation of society, we find that the actors are not only persons, they are also representatives of the " principalities and powers " that rule social and civilised life. What are " principalities and powers " ? These are spiritual beings composed, as it were, of the self-interest and the characteristic ideas of certain human groupings. For instance, we speak of national States as " powers " in this sense : similarly, a trade or professional union is a minor " principality " ; it is a body which has come about to serve the particular needs of a group of people living in a particular way ; and it acts according to its own acquired habits of thinking and feeling. All these groups behave in life according to their *imagination* of what life is. In this connection we may recall, for instance, the behaviour of the silver-smiths at Ephesus in St. Paul's day. But it is in the central scenes of the holy drama, those of the passion of our Lord, that the greatest principalities and powers which operate in human society are exhibited most fully, and the actors rise to such a stature that they become, as it were, the very archetypes of society. Every *essential* constituency of society plays some part in the Gospel drama, and reveals its deepest character in doing so. There are the ordinary people following their ordinary, useful occupations of husbandry, herding or fishing, against the background of nature : and over against them are ranged all the more privileged classes. The local governors play their parts, and the local tax-gatherers rather a big part. The representatives of the instituted religion are, either gladly or unwillingly, aware that they are deeply involved in what is happening ; and as the drama rises to its height, those who take a moralist or legalist view of religion (the Pharisees) show increasing anger, and there is also increasing opposition from those who take a traditionalist or intellectualist view of the matter—the Scribes. We see the activities of the money-changers in their relation with institutional religion, the one thing that provoked Jesus to an act of spontaneous militancy, which perhaps precipitated the tragedy. (When the Romans finally sacked Jerusalem in A.D. 70 they found many waggon-loads of gold in the vaults beneath the Temple.) We also see the imperial power in its representative, Pilate, and are made to realise how this power, which has all the physical force of society at its disposal, is, perhaps for that reason, without any moral courage whatsoever.

Much more could be said, of course, and some of what I have said may not be quite right : but if we need to discern (as you once suggested) what things are most *significant* in the workings of society, has not the Gospel presented, with all the power of supreme art (although it is infinitely more than a work of art) precisely those things of most *significance*, and the relations between them ? So complete and powerful is this presentation, that it is as though the appearance of this supreme Person in our ordinary social life brought about a dramatic crisis in which all the permanent forces in man's society-making received a vital challenge, and were compelled to expose themselves in their deepest reality. Not only what they happened to be at that moment : but what they always were and will be everywhere.

THE RELEVANCE OF THE DRAMA TO-DAY

This is real drama, therefore the actors are not merely social types : they are indeed primarily individual souls : nevertheless they do exhibit and exemplify the spiritual forces of society, and in the drama they enact we are beholding the nature of society, as well as of man, raised to the highest degree of manifestation. It is impossible to contemplate the Gospel narrative long and earnestly without some realisation that this is so, as I think all studious Christians must be aware. But, they think, is not this also a very different world ? Where, in this old provincial Roman scene, are the social factors that most disturb us here and now—the factory workers, for instance, either as slaves of the machine or class-conscious proletarians ; where are the militant godless or the representatives of science ?

To this there are two answers, one of less and one of more importance. If one reads the secular history of the empire in which St. Paul travelled and in which he laid the foundations of a new society, one is surprised to find that uprooted masses of workers were not exactly unknown to it, nor were joint-stock companies and their failures, nor were Governments providing public works, nor dictators seizing power in the name of the masses. Many of these political factors were just about as common and as politically formidable then as they are now : and some of us, who have time and inclina-

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tion for historical study, may be often usefully employed in widening our historical knowledge of the setting of the Christian drama.

Yet all this is, in a sense, of a minor and external significance. It is only from the central scenes that imagination can be kindled into the light of understanding. For as soon as we cease to be spectators and become actors in any part of the contemporary drama—whether as members of a proletarian group, a professional or intellectual coterie, a board of business directors, or any other social group—the forces and characters, the principalities and powers, with which we are intimately concerned are as personal as those we saw incarnate in Jerusalem and Judaea. In any of these activities of ours, if there appears the least little bit of pure, unselfish, devoted activity, this Christ-like appearance (faint as it may be) produces the archetypal reactions ; it is helped or hindered by others, acting according to the same ideas (however disguised or distorted) that were incarnate in Peter, Nicodemus, the Sadducees and so forth. Always, everywhere, if the flame of the pure life-spirit flickers into the affairs of men (not only when they are engaged upon supposedly religious things) there are reflections and flashes, as it were, in all minds present of some of the spiritual beings that were present in the ministry and passion of the Lord. Often this is so, when men are thinking of their affairs in quite secular connections. And if it is not so, then nothing significant is happening. There may be a play—words and action—but really it is meaningless. Much of what we call life is meaningless—a mere passing-out into nescience.

This imaginative understanding of society would be marred, of course, if we descended to any crude, intellectual identification of present-day movements or personalities with those of the Gospel drama. Rather it is a matter of study, of meditation and contemplation of the full reality of the sacred drama as a thing complete in itself. All we can say is that, to the soul which has thus recreated by imagination the living memory of these supreme events, life is revealed in a different and deeper aspect. Such a soul perceives the " principalities and powers " as they work in its present world ; it knows better how to deal with them ; it knows also that, for all their formidable reality in this world, they are merely illusions compared with the reality of any one individual being. Upon this difficult perception depends the very possibility of effective Christian social action.

One great advantage of seeking this imaginative understanding through the Gospel drama is that, in proportion as it is acquired, it can influence not only our thoughts : it can influence our conception of what is happening in society, and our response to it, even when we are not thinking ; it can suggest right thoughts in moments of inattention. It can also sustain social courage in threatening times : for the Christian imagination conceiving how much we are living in the same drama in which Christ Himself lived and died, and how the same actors—Peter and Judas, Caiaphas, Pilate and the rest—are all in our world to-day in different guises, performing the same eternal drama, can also help us to realise that God is in it too, bringing about, in ways not our ways, worlds better than we could think out and design. And yet not so: but only in so far as there are individuals who live, rejoice, suffer and die, in the Spirit which, out of this greatest of human tragedies, arose triumphant in the end.

Yours sincerely,
PHILIP MAIRET

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